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ABSTRACT

The advent of the women's liberation movement in the past few years has prompted a curricular innovation at colleges and universities known as women's courses. As defined in this paper, women's courses explore the nature of women through historical, literary, biological and psychological means. The cause of the emergence of women's courses is the dissatisfaction with the way in which the role of women is portrayed or largely ignored in traditional programs of study. Proponents of women's studies say that the current status of women in contemporary course offerings reflects a viewpoint that takes male supremacy for granted, devaluing women's contributions to society. In addition, they assert women have internalized these negative views to the point where they have poor self-images that result in lower occupational and personal aspirations. Thus, the purpose of women's courses is to restore women's self-esteem and to instill a sense of motivation and personal identity. (Author/HS)

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Research Currents

THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN'S COURSES IN HIGHER EDUCATION by Lora H. Robinson

Enough women's courses have appeared on campuses across the country to warrant considering them a major curricular innovation. This review attempts to cover many of the aspects of special importance to those evaluating women's courses for their own campus or discipline. In addition, an extensive bibliography was prepared for those who wish to explore women's courses further.

There is some confusion as to which courses properly belong to the new area of women's studies. Those compiling lists of courses in the "womanities," as coined by White, Reid, and Fox (1971), have included ones which serve women's needs, such as self-defense, ones which are about traditional women's interests, such as child care, ones in which coverage of women is an integral part of the topic, such as sex roles and the family, and ones which are about women only. For the purposes of this paper, women's courses will consist of those in the last two categories. Women's courses explore the nature of women through historical, literary, biological and psychological means. In this way, women's courses differ from traditional curriculum offerings including home economics and women's continuing education, since their content is on or about, not for women.

There is some disparity in the estimated number of women's courses. But there is no doubt that the courses have multiplied rapidly. A series of anthologies of women's studies courses provides an indication of their numbers and growth. In September 1970, the first anthology contained 17 syllabi. The December 1970 anthology contained 65 course designs along with reading lists for these courses. By October 1971 a list of over 700 courses representing 178 institutions had been compiled. By June 1972 the Modern Language Association's Clearinghouse on Women's Studies, the group primarily responsible for continuing efforts at identifying women's courses, reported 160 additional courses. Further, they estimate that the courses actually identified comprise only half the actual courses in existence.

From their inception the preponderance of women's courses were in the humanities and social sciences, the fields where the most women teachers are found traditionally. Over time, a number have emerged in the arts, sciences and professions. Typical course titles include: Women and the Law (Yale); Social History of Women in America (Wheaton College); Sociology of Sex Differences (University of Washington); The Idea of Women in Philosophy (Towson State College); Image of Women in Art (Stanford University); Images of Women in Modern Literature (St. Joseph's College, Indiana); Economic Position of Women (Portland State University); and Women in Education (Cornell University).

Those who discuss the evolution of women's courses acknowledge a link with the wider based Women's Liberation Movement. Howe (1970 and 1972) points out how the geographical spread of women's courses parallels the spread of the Women's Movement. Sommerville (1971) briefly traces the development of women's studies from the Civil Rights Movement to the present. From the Civil Rights Movement, she notes that women learned both how to press for social change, and that independent women's groups were needed. On college campuses, small groups shared their experiences and began examining women's status. In an atmosphere where other campus reforms were being sought, including the introduction of Black, Chicano, and other ethnic studies, women began to voice their discontents. Reading lists, reprints of articles and papers, and position papers circulated freely. Women's courses appeared in "free universities," experimental colleges, extension programs, and a few continuing education programs. Almost simultaneously courses were introduced into the college curriculum.

Courses on women began in various ways. In some cases the impetus came from regular faculty members. They initiated a new course following standard institutional procedures; they changed the content of a course which already existed; and they offered a women's course under a form which allowed the topic focus to vary such as independent study or readings or the "pro-seminar."

On other occasions, women's courses have been started in response to students' desires and demands. At Bryn Mawr students held a sit-in to enforce their demands for women's courses (Trecker, 1971; and Sims, 1971). The third type of pressure group which has succeeded in getting women's courses started consists of a combination of students, faculty, and community women.

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Women's courses were started because of discontent with women's status as it is reflected today in the content of college courses. Feminists note the virtual absence of women in history, literature, art and other fields as taught. Or women are treated as peripheral, an appendix to the topic, or as exceptions to the norm. References to women in textbooks, card catalogs, and indexes reveal a scholarly tradition in which women are virtually invisible. Freeman (1971) notes that the lack of materials or information listed under the category "women"

> . . . would not matter if material on women were fully integrated into the book, but one soon realizes that when the author talks about "man," he means male. Major research has been done—such as that on achievement motivation—from which women were systematically excluded because their inclusion "messed up the model," and there was no curiosity as to why this was so. Major books have been written on such relevant topics as the occupational structure, in which whole sections are devoted to "minority groups," but only a footnote to women (one third of the labor force).

Proponents of women's studies say that the current status of women in modern knowledge reflects a viewpoint which takes male supremacy for granted, thereby devaluing women's contributions. In addition, they assert that women have internalized these negative views of women's activities to the point where women have poor self-images and resultant lowered aspirations. Thus, one of the purposes of women's courses is to restore women's self-esteem and to instill a sense of identity.

Other purposes suggested for women's studies and courses ranged from the simple filling in of gaps of knowledge to the instigation of political and social change. For example, Trecker (1971) states that in addition to providing "new information about women, their history, and their accomplishments," women's courses challenge cultural assumptions by providing alternative ways of looking at women.

Probably the most controversial aspect with respect to women's courses hinges on differences in educational philosophy between women's studies advocates and critics. On one hand, critics argue that the courses are too ideological, indoctrinating, and radicalizing, and therefore are not scholarly and lack academic rigor. In response feminists reject the notion of "value-free scholarship." Trecker (1971) points out that

> . . . such writers as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and Naomi Weisstein have raised doubts about the existence of any value-free discipline.

Thus, they hold that biases extend right down to the fundamental categories of analysis through which the scholar tries to understand and explain a phenomenon.

Many women's studies advocates have extended the above criticism to education in general. This has resulted in rejection of the traditional notion of a separation between the academic world and the political and social realities of everyday life. And it has meant that women's courses have been promoted as a political, social, and academic endeavor. Such an orientation, some teachers feel, makes women's courses relevant in a way that few other courses in academia are.

Certainly, from all reports women's courses have been attracting a great deal of interest from students. In the spring of 1970, when a team of teachers introduced "The Evolution of Female Personality" at Cornell University, the course attracted 203 undergraduates and about 150 auditors (Tobias, 1970e). This phenomenon is not unique. Similar occurrences are reported at other institutions that began women's courses.

Despite the popularity of women's courses, on occasion efforts to install such courses have met with resistance. Some administrators are convinced that women's courses are a fad and have limited appeal. Some faculty members feel that women's studies as a separate discipline is academically unjustifiable because it would necessitate a further division of knowledge.

> When Dr. Sochen first tried to get her course approved, her own department accepted it enthusiastically—but the school's curriculum council was hesitant about such a nontraditional approach, and Dr. Sochen discovered more of the antagonism came from females than males. "They didn't seem to think there was a history of women," says Dr. Sochen. "It was very aggravating."
>
> Invited to defend her idea before the council, she finally decided it was worth the trouble and accepted the offer. Eventually, she won approval for the course (Van Matre, 1970).

Among women's courses both traditional and more innovative teaching approaches are found. Traditionalists emphasize the soundness of academic content, requirements such as papers, structured class discussion, and the assignment of grades. Innovators have experimented in a variety of ways.

Probably the most common innovation utilized in women's courses has been to present the materials from a multidisciplinary perspective. This was especially characteristic of the first women's courses, which attempted to be comprehensive. Also, the issues covered, such as abortion, divorce laws, sexual attitudes, sex roles, and child care require examination from more than one perspective. Tobias's course utilized as many as six different disciplines: sociology, literature, economics, law, history and psychology.

> I found myself often in the course of a single sentence touching on a number of disciplines. More than that, I was teaching the tools of the several fields—statistics, literary exegesis, macro-economics. I am no genius. It is merely that one masters what one needs to make sense of the material and in three years I have mastered large parts of quite a number of fields (Tobias, 1972).

With time, more specialized, usually upper-level courses were introduced. These typically examined topics in depth from the perspective of one discipline.

A second, frequently used innovative technique is team or group teaching. For example, 27 women faculty members from 20 departments and 24 disciplines took part in the University of Wisconsin's first women's course. In this case participation took the form of a guest lecture. In other cases, groups of teachers were present at and responsible for the course throughout its life. Under this condition some form of coordination among teachers, such as weekly meetings, became necessary. Team teaching is also common.

Teachers of women's courses have sought consciously to break down the barrier between students and teachers. Efforts are made to create a nonauthoritarian, egalitarian atmosphere. Efforts are made to prevent the domination of discussions by either students or faculty. Attempts are made to reduce competition in the classroom and foster cooperation. Class activities, including teaching and research, many times are carried out on a collective basis. Grades have sometimes been eliminated by substituting either pass/fail or self-grading. In addition, variable course credit has been offered, and exams have been cut. These changes in traditional class procedure are justified on the grounds that what and how one teaches are inseparable.

Many who teach women's courses believe that academic learning and personal experience should be relevant to each other. In support of this educational philosophy, both personal and experiential matters are fostered and encouraged. A number of devices are utilized to facilitate the combination

of rationality and feeling. One frequently used technique is the personal or readings journal in which a student enters individual reactions to course content. Others have fostered openness and intimacy by opening the class to all interested parties, devoting portions of time to consciousness-raising, convening class around social occasions, such as meals, and breaking large lecture classes into smaller, more informal discussion groups.

The student composition of women's courses has run from all female to all male (Showalter and Ohmann (eds.), 1971). In 1971, White et al, estimated that one in ten students were male. A sampling of the composition of classes would seem to indicate that this estimate is conservative. Although classes have not been closed to males, some have had sex-segregated discussion groups.

Second hand reports of students' responses to women's courses would indicate that they are enthusiastic. Most of the reporting has been done by the course instructors or organizers. Lerner reports:

> Several of the students expressed the conviction, in their evaluations, that their ideas of what to do with their lives had undergone change, as a result of the seminar. They were more open to different options of life patterns, different ways of making use of the many opportunities open to them, different educational goals. Two of them were reinforced in their desire to go on to graduate study; one or two thought, for the first time, they might like to become historians. The sampling was, of course, small, but the experience of the seminar would indicate that to a group of female students the opportunity for frank discussion of these troublesome questions can be of great vocational and intellectual significance (Howe (ed.), 1970).

Other student reactions to women's courses have included: increased valuation of own intellect; increased awareness of the male orientation of other courses; increased awareness of professor statements that are mythical views of women and their roles; more positive feelings toward personal potential; significant re-orientation of attitudes and views; depression; anger; a feeling that the course had personal meaning; and increased awareness of male chauvinism in aspects of day-to-day life.

A number of writers have commented on the depth of emotion that women's courses seem capable of evoking.

> At the end of a literature course, one girl came up to Buffalo's Ann Scott and declared: "I want you to know that you've ruined my life. Everything I read now fills me with rage" ("Studying the Sisterhood," 1972).

Another problem encountered is deep depression on the part of women students who see little hope after lengthy documentation of sex discrimination. Teachers are struggling to combat potential despair and depression and to provide support for students who find their attitudes and values challenged or find the course structure threatening.

Currently most of the analysis of women's courses has been of an anecdotal nature. There have been a number of general surveys attempting to assess the extent of women's courses on campuses. One was done within the American Studies discipline and is presented in Chamaj (1971). She found a "clear expression of interest in the American woman as a subject for study, both in new courses and existing courses." Marks (1971) questioned the dean of women and the chairmen of the history departments in accredited Alabama colleges and universities concerning the teaching of women's history. She found that no women's history courses were being taught on the campuses of those institutions which responded. Cless (1971) systematically evaluated one women's course, and her report contains a description of the course members, the educational structure and class format, members' reaction to the course, a summary evaluation, and recommendations. Although a number of other evaluation efforts are currently underway, the research on women's courses is still in its beginning stages.

Women's courses face a number of problems and issues. The crucial unresolved issue is whether or not women's studies is or can be a distinct intellectual discipline. For this to be true, women's studies would have to at least develop a framework of analysis, perhaps a feminist approach, which is unique from those in existence in the traditional disciplines. Some analysts insist that women's studies maintain a multidisciplinary approach that would enhance the field's uniqueness. However, it doesn't seem likely that this feature alone would be sufficient to distinguish women's studies as a separate field.

Those who don't view women's studies as intellectually distinct see no justification for separate women's courses, women's programs, and degrees in women's studies, or they feel that women's studies will cease to exist after being absorbed into the current disciplines. Even if women's studies does not have the features needed to be considered a separate intellectual discipline, there is an aspect which justifies many of the current activities—the lack of research on women.

This state of affairs results in the students and teachers engaging in original research for a women's course. Teachers report that the students are excited over the prospect of doing research in a new field. Martin reports:

> Many students were radicalized by having to write a portrait of a nineteenth-century feminist; singly and together, they searched the shelves of the Queen's College Library, their local libraries, and finally the New York Public Library and discovered that there was very little information available on many of the most important feminists. When they were able to locate materials such as letters, diaries, autobiographies and tracts, they discovered that in addition to being improperly catalogued, these materials were left to crumble in an obscure corner . . . Surprisingly, the men students were most outraged by this sexist influence on the distribution of knowledge, probably because this was the first time they confronted it on a very practical and immediate level (Showalter and Ohman (eds.), 1971).

The amount of current interest in women's studies indicates that women's courses will continue to expand even if at a slower rate. Under these circumstances a course of action with respect to a number of other currently debated issues will be determined. Issues raised include: (1) *Do women's colleges have special obligations to pursue women's studies?* Since many women's colleges are faced with reevaluating their functions and purpose, it is likely that some will adopt women's study programs. Barnard and Douglass College have women's programs; Alverno, Bryn Mawr, College of St. Catherine, Goddard, Goucher, Mount Holyoke, Mundelein, Radcliffe, and Smith have women's courses. (2) *What relation should women's studies have to other educational experiments and educational reform?* For example, should women's courses relate to women on and off campus? Many instructors hope courses will contribute to women's increased self-esteem, more participation in new spheres of activities, raised career aspirations, and to the breakdown of field differentiation by sex. (3) *Should men be encouraged to go into women's studies?* Should men be encouraged to teach women's courses? Currently men are doing both. (4) *How can the needed financial and human resources be obtained?* The current financial straits of many colleges has stiffened resistance to many new programs. (5) *What degrees should be offered?* Right now Cambridge-Goddard Graduate School for Social Change offers an MA

in women's studies. Sarah Lawrence College started an individualized master's program in Women's History. Richmond College/CUNY and the University of Washington/Seattle offer a BA; Douglass College/Rutgers and San Francisco State University allow a major with emphasis on women.

Presently, women's courses are not an established curricular feature, and there is still too much debate, and too many issues are still unresolved to accurately chart the future of women's courses and women's studies. However, if the degree of professional and personal commitment demonstrated by women's studies advocates in the past continues, the fate of women's courses and programs is secure.

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